

### 37 The Mary Seacole Funds of 1857 and 1867

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37 [ TWC 30(4) p26 2013 ]

I refer to the late Tony Lucking's report of 'Mary Seacole Day', in this journal (Vol 22-4), pp. 30 and 37, 2005) and to Lynn McDonald's valuable article on Mary Seacole in this journal (Vol 30-2), pp. 36-38, 2012). I entirely agree that Mary Seacole's reputation has been grossly over-enhanced in recent years, apparently by those with some form of socio-political agenda. In contrast, however, it appears that some public, near-contemporary and readily-available evidence of the value placed on her activities in the Crimea has not been fully taken into account. That evidence occurs in the newspaper accounts of the Seacole Funds in 1857 and 1867, of the 'Mary Seacole Festival' in 1867 and in her obituary in 1881. I have published a brief summary elsewhere (Dr Douglas J Austin, 'Seacole's honours', *History Today*, 55(4), p. 60, April, 2005), but this article sets out all the evidence I currently possess.

In *The Times* for 11th April, 1857, William Howard Russell wrote as follows:-

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,— May I ask you to say a word for poor Mrs. Seacole? There has been a subscription got up for her which is yet in its infancy, but I miss many names on the list which ought to have been inter primos. And for what does Mrs. Seacole deserve a subscription? For courage, devotion, goodness of heart, public services, great losses undeservedly incurred. I have seen her go down underfire with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded men, and a more tender or skilful hand about a wound or a broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons. I saw her at the assaults on the Redan, at the Battle of the Tchernaya, at the fall of Sevastopol, laden, not with plunder, good old creature! but with wine, bandages, and food for the wounded or the prisoners. Her hands, too, performed the last offices for some of the noblest of our slain. Her hut was surrounded every morning by the rough navvies and Land Transport men, who had a faith in her proficiency in the healing art, which she justified by many cures and by removing obstinate cases of diarrhoea, dysentery, and similar camp maladies. These are facts for the world at large, not for any officer of the Crimean army, to whom they are known already. If this poor woman had been paid what she was owed - if she had but the amount of the "little bills" cashed by her in the Crimea, and not paid at home, she would need no subscription; but she has been unfortunate, not only in these respects, but she has been deceived and robbed by one in whom she placed trust and confidence. I hope the public, as well as the army, will give enough to Mrs. Seacole to set her up - late in life, poor soul! though it be, it is all she asks - for a fresh start in the world, and that as she was liberal and kind, so may she receive a kind and liberal support.

Your obedient servant,

Tunbridge-wells. W. H. R.

In *The Times* for 17th July, 1857, we have separate lists of the Committee (C) and Patrons (P) of 'THE SEACOLE FUND', established to rescue Mary from the bankruptcy which came upon her when the Crimean War ended in 1856. I have combined those lists as follows:

H.R.H. the Duke of Cambridge, General Commanding-in-Chief.	(P)	
H.S.H. Prince Edward of Saxe-Weimar. C.B.	(C)	
Lieutenant General Sir W. Codrington, M.P.	(P)	
Major-General Lord Rokeby, K.C.B., Chairman and Hon. Treas	(C & P)	
General Lord Gough, K.C.B.	(C)	
General Sir J. F. Burgoyne, Bart, G.C.B.	(C)	
Major-General Sir W. Fenwick Williams. K.C.B., M.P.	(C & P)	
Major-General Sir R. Airey, K.C.B., Quarter-Master-General	(C)	
Rear-Admiral Sir Stephen Lushington, K.C.B.	(C)	
Colonel Lord George Paget, C.B.	(C)	
Colonel M'Murdo, C.B., Director Military Train	(C)	
Colonel Chapman, R.E., C.B.	(C)	
Lieut.-Colonel Ridley, C.B.	(C)	(*)
Major the Hon. F. Keane, R.E.	(C)	(*)
His Grace the Duke of Newcastle	(C & P)	
His Grace the Duke of Wellington	(C & P)	
Her Grace the Duchess of Wellington	(P)	
The Most Noble the Marchioness of Elv	(P)	
The Most Noble the Marchioness of Winchester	(P)	
The Right Hon. The Earl of Westmoreland	(P)	
The Right Hon. The Countess of Westmoreland	(P)	
The Right Hon. The Earl of Euston	(P)	
The Right Hon. Lady Rokeby	(P)	
The Right Hon. Lord Ward	(C)	(*)
The Hon. Mrs. Dawson Damer	(P)	
W.T.Doyne. Esq. Superintendent-General Army Work Corps.	(C)	(*)
W. H. Russell, LL.D., late Special Correspondent of The Times	(C)	(*)

[ (\*) = DJA note: present in the Crimea during the campaign ]

I quote from that article: The Colonels of the following regiments have most kindly forwarded the object the Committee have in view, by granting the assistance of the Bands of their distinguished corps, which will be united in one Colossal Orchestra, viz.: the First Life Guards, the Second Life Guards, the Royal Horse Guards Blue, the Grenadier Guards, the Coldstream Guards, the Scots Fusilier Guards, the Royal Engineers, the Royal Artillery, the Royal Marines (Woolwich), the Royal Marines (Chatham), and the 11th Hussars. "... "The Committee, in undertaking Mrs. Seacole's cause, are satisfied that they only fulfil a public duty. Her kindness to the sick and wounded in the Crimea have established a strong claim upon the generosity of all classes. There can be no doubt that the services gratuitously rendered by her to the sick and wounded of the British army before Sevastopol interfered materially with her commercial pursuits. She has fallen from no fault of her own. Her business arrangements were excellent. Notwithstanding her generosity and kindness, she would not only have been able to meet all her engagements, but even to realize an honest independence as a reward for her constant labour and unfailing sympathy in the service and cause of our Crimean army. However, circumstances totally unforeseen put an end to the war, and left her with a large stock of goods and material, (which it was impossible to sell or remove) then wholly worthless, and even a source of great embarrassment. The Committee feel satisfied that the British Army will unanimously support this tribute to Mrs. Seacole's worth, and prove the affection and gratitude it feels for the services she rendered. The well-known correspondent of The Times, who was an eye-witness of her conduct, bears testimony to Mrs. Seacole's merits in the following terms: "For what does Mrs. Seacole deserve a subscription? For courage, devotion, goodness of heart, public services, great losses, undeservedly incurred. I have seen her go down under fire with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded men; and a more tender or skilful hand about a wound or a broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons. I saw her at the assaults on the Redan, at the battle of the Tchernaya, at the fall of Sevastopol, laden, not with plunder, good old

creature! but with wine, bandages, and food for the wounded or the prisoners. Her hands, too, performed the last offices for some of the noblest of our slain. Her hut was surrounded every morning by the rough navvies and Land Transport Men, who had a faith in her proficiency in the healing arts which she justified by many cures, and by removing obstinate cases of diarrhoea, dysentery, and similar camp maladies. These are facts for the world at large, not for any officer of the Crimean army, to whom they are known already. I hope the public, as well as the army, will give enough to Mrs. Seacole to set her up - late in life, poor soul, though it be, it is all she asks - for a fresh start in the world, and that, as she was liberal and kind, so may she receive a kind and liberal support. ” . . . “The Committee feel that they have nothing to add to this testimony. They confidently rely upon the sympathy and support of the public in providing a fund sufficient to secure to this worthy woman a provision for the autumn of her life, and to place her in a position, where her unimpaired habits of activity and industry may be turned to good and useful account.

The Illustrated London News reported some related items in that year. Thus, on 25th July, 1857, we find an advertisement of the Seacole Festival (Vol.31, p.95) and a most favourable review (Vol. 31, p. 102) of *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, edited by W.J.S. That entertaining book's appearance was clearly timed to coincide with the Festival and, while it was edited, there is no evidence that it was 'ghost written' - as some have claimed. The *Illustrated London News* issue of 1st August, 1857, gave an enthusiastic report of the Seacole Festival, from which I quote:

... a lady who has well earned the nation's gratitude for services (though in a humbler sphere) akin to those which have shed such lustre on the name of Miss Nightingale. A committee, composed of many of our most distinguished military men, are engaged in testifying the feelings of the army towards her and her family . . . .

The mention of a 'family' is very interesting, given the presence of an alleged daughter (Sally or Sarah) in the Crimea. The 1857 Festival was a social success and Mary was received with (and enjoyed) great public acclaim. The Managers of the Festival, however, proved inferior and were later taken to court. Only a modest fund, of some £228 9s 8d, was accumulated. Over the ensuing ten years, I have found only one mention of Mary Seacole in *The Times* - in the issue for 31st August, 1866 (p.6) - when she was a contributor to the '*Mansion House Cholera Relief Fund*'. Intriguingly, she is listed as 'Mrs. Seacole (Crimea), 100 bottles of anti-cholera medicine and 100 boxes of pills'. She does appear to have been doing some public good in England during those years and may have been supporting herself, at least partially, by manufacturing and selling her own tried-and-tested remedies. By 1867, however, it appears that Mary's efforts to support herself were failing and, indeed, the following article appeared in *The Times* for 30th January, 1867:

SEACOLE FUND - The disinterested services of Mrs. Seacole in the Crimea, Panama, and England, being considered by the undermentioned gentlemen as deserving of recognition and reward from the army, navy, and British nation, they have formed themselves into a Committee to carry out a scheme to ensure for Mrs. Seacole in her declining years, the means of obtaining remunerative employment, whereby competence would to her be secured: The Committee feel the more emboldened to solicit AID to carry out this good work, from the circumstance of the Queen having been graciously pleased to express her approbation of Mrs. Seacole's services, and Her Majesty's kind interest in her future welfare.

#### PATRONS

His Royal Highness the Prince of WALES  
His Royal Highness the Duke of EDINBURGH  
His Royal Highness the Duke of CAMBRIDGE

Further to Queen Victoria's approval - and the patronage of three Royal Princes - the Committee included fifteen prominent men (several of whom had worked for the 1857 Fund). The subscription list which followed included some 27 names, many of highly-placed persons. A total of £100 had been accumulated up to that date. A similar appeal was published on 2nd March and by 11th March, the list had expanded to 110 names, with a total of £236 9s 0d. At least 33 of the subscribers had been serving British Army officers in the Crimea (thanks to Tony Margrave's invaluable compilation). In addition, on 18th July a theatre group '*The Wandering Thespians*' advertised a performance at the Bijou Theatre, Haymarket of '*The Romantic Heart*', etc., in aid of the Seacole Fund. In passing, Queen Victoria's gracious approbation may have derived, in part, from Mary Seacole's alleged (as yet unproven) service as a masseuse to Princess Alexandra of Wales.

Mary Seacole died on 14th May, 1881. Her short obituary, published in *The Times* for 21st May, 1881, (p.7), states: The trustees of the fund established some time since in behalf of Mrs. Mary Seacole wish it to be known that she died on the 14th inst. The deceased, it will be remembered, greatly distinguished herself as a nurse on the battlefield and in hospitals during the Crimean War ... In 1855, after it had been announced that no more nurses were required in the Crimea, she established a mess-table and comfortable quarters for sick and convalescent officers at Balaklava, landing there in the month of February. She was present at many battles, and at the risk of her life often carried the wounded off the field. Before Sevastopol she was a patient nurse among those stricken with cholera, and when she returned to England after the peace she was ruined in fortune and injured in health . . . the sum raised for Mrs. Seacole enabled her to end her days in comfortable ease. Strange to say, she has bequeathed all her property to persons of title.

There are several clear errors in that obituary. She certainly assisted a number of the sick and wounded, but as a 'doctress' rather than in the modern capacity of a 'nurse'. She set up no more than an ordinary sutler's business, where she sold food and drink for money. I know of no record of her carrying wounded off the field. The final sentence is blatantly incorrect. Her will (dated 2nd September 1876) showed her to own a good competence and was made primarily in favour of her relatives, with £50 bequests to Lord Rokeby, Colonel Keane and Count Gleichen (who also received a diamond ring).

Beyond question, the official British medical services did far more good to far more people than one good-hearted lady could ever achieve alone - in the intervals of running her business. Equally, I strongly doubt that Mary's business activities in the Crimea alone gained her the long-term goodwill of so many of the great and good (ranging from the Special Correspondent of *The Times* to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army to the Monarch herself). Why would they join together in public (twice!) to promote the financial interests of no more than a bankrupted former sutler (and - in their terms - 'a woman of colour')? I am convinced that they wished to recognise and reward real services. The unequivocal existence of the 1857 and 1867 funding operations constitutes - in my opinion - evidence of good work by Mary Seacole for the health of at least some of the sick and wounded in the Crimea. My belief is reinforced by the 1857 *Illustrated London News* items and by her 1881 obituary. She is well commemorated by the Blue Plaque outside her home at 14 Soho Square, Westminster, London W1. A massive statue outside St Thomas' Hospital is utterly inappropriate and discredits the real history of a lady of heart and character.